

# HERE THE STATUS SYMBOLS CLASH

## SOCIAL STATUS AND STATUS EXPRESSION IN FINNISH HOMES

• EDWARD DUTTON •

### ABSTRACT

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This article aims to make an original contribution to the discussion of the dynamics of social status expression in Finland. Drawing upon fieldwork in Oulu and Kokkola, it will examine how a sample of Finnish people express and play for social status through the objects with which they decorate their homes. It suggests that Finnish social stratification may be undergoing a shift away from correlation with formal education towards identification with broader consumption patterns, especially amongst the young. However, it will also highlight social status-based differences in terms of both forms of expression and touch on how these reflect the evolution of Finnish social stratification and culture more broadly.

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Keywords: Finland, social status, home, decoration

### *Introduction*

Any social anthropologist who attempts to research systems of social stratification in Finland is likely to encounter a difficulty that he would not in countries such as England or France. Though the situation appears to be gradually changing (see Dutton 2009; Anttonen 2005), many Finns do not self-identify as being part of a particular social class. If they do, interviewees—especially older and less educated interviewees—may argue that ‘all Finns are working class’ and that only the ‘Swedish speakers’ are ‘higher class’. Finland has a five percent Swedish-speaking minority whose ancestors, during the nineteenth century, comprised the majority of the elite and the city-dwelling middle class (see Talve 1997). Anttonen (2005: 150) notes the extent to which class differences within language groups in Finland are still popularly minimized, with all Finnish speakers portrayed as somehow equal “ordinary Finns”. For Anttonen (2005: 150), the supposed classlessness of Finnish-speaking society might be regarded as something of a Finnish nationalist dogma evolved since Finland’s Civil War of 1917–18.

Accordingly, perhaps the most useful way for a social scientist to gain a theoretical purchase on the system of Finnish social stratification or differentiation is through looking at latent discourses, as discerned through fieldwork. This has already been conducted in terms of a broad analysis of consumption patterns and emic perceptions of social types which identified consumption-based in and out-groups partially defined by levels of education, language skills and ‘internationalism’ (see Dutton, in press). Indeed, it has

long been held that education is a more significant element in Finnish social stratification than in many comparable societies such as Denmark (Lander 1976), though my findings suggest certain recent transformations in this regard. Meanwhile, Finnish sociologists (see below) have strongly argued that the relatively homogenous nature of Finnish society makes it difficult to apply the kind of consumption-based class models employed in the UK (Fox 2004) or France (Bourdieu 1984; see Dutton 2009 for a critique of these arguments). However, given the breadth of the subject and the limitations of the article format, here I aim merely to present an examination of the ‘social status’ dynamics in Finnish homes, avoiding the contentious notion of ‘social class’ (and the perceived cultural baggage which it carries) because it would need a very substantial aside to defend its usage. Thus this article looks at differences in how people convey social status, and how Finnish status perceptions are evolving. It will highlight a number of emerging patterns, most notably that status accrued through education is expressed more subtly amongst the younger generations of professionals. I will also consider the findings in relation to observations about Norway and, more broadly, Western societies where the idea of ‘class’ is more overt. In writing this article, my aim is to further discussion of social stratification in Finland, especially with regard to covert attempts to convey status through the selection and arrangement of objects within homes in the Oulu and Kokkola regions where fieldwork was conducted.

*Previous research on Finnish-speaking social stratification*

There is relatively little previous research on Finnish social stratification as it relates to Finnish speakers, and certainly very little that uses ethnographic methods. From an historical perspective, Jutikkala and Pirinen (1996: 308) observe a linguistic class distinction—conspicuous until the nineteenth century—between “Swedish speakers” who comprised the upper class and town-dwelling middle class (Finland was a Swedish domain until 1809), and Finnish speakers who tended to be country-dwelling, small-scale farmers. Stark-Arola (1999: 77) points out that there were social divisions amongst the Finnish-speaking farmers and that these were more pronounced in the west than the east, becoming more noticeable in the nineteenth century. In some areas, these divisions were reflected in marriage ties. However, the divisions were not particularly profound—mainly distinguishing between owners of small farms, tenant farmers and labourers. She observes that during the nineteenth century, and coinciding with a Fenno-nationalist political movement, Finnish speakers began to become more educated and a Finnish-speaking middle class began to develop in cities such as Helsinki, as did a Finnish-speaking industrial (rather than just agricultural) working class. Anttonen (2005: 150) argues that the idea of Finland-Swedes as the upper class is a national myth which ensures that Finns are “equal” while the elite is “foreign”, even though there is a Finnish-speaking elite: “Class differences are strongly emphasised when language is a factor but de-emphasised within a language group.” Other recent research has also highlighted growing differentiation. For example, Järvinen and Kolbe (2008) argue that class differences are becoming more pronounced especially in relation to hobbies; many of the essays in *Yhteiskuntaluokka ja sukupuoli* (Tolonen ed. 2008) look at forms of *de facto* class segregation in Finland, while

some articles approach status differences in relation to very specific phenomena such as food (Prättälä et al. 1992).

Bourdieu's (1984) conception of social class—with its emphasis on taste—has been discussed in Finnish sociology (see Rahkonen 2008). Alapuro (1988) criticised it for being too grounded in French culture and submitted it may thus be inapplicable to Finland. He has elsewhere stressed the strong, informal, local dimensions of Finnish stratification (e.g. Alapuro 1995). Mäkelä (1985) claimed the ideas in *Distinction* were problematic due to the supposed 'homogeneity' of Finland. However, Roos and Rahkonen (1985) attempted to apply the model to Finland based on the data then at hand. They found that it is vital to have a detailed understanding of the distinctive dynamics of the status symbols in this 'peripheral' culture rather than simply applying a model developed elsewhere and I am mindful of this in my own analysis. I present the following ethnographic observations in the certainty that ethnographic scrutiny can illuminate aspects of Finnish social stratification not accessible to other methods in social research such as the large-scale survey.

Even etic, anthropological discussions of Finnish social stratification—which employ a universal class model based on employment—are relatively few, and those that exist tend only to examine the class structure of villages (Lander 1976; Abrahams 1991). Lander (1976: 97) noted that class was judged strongly in relation to education and the profession to which education led. "In comparing the Finnish hierarchy with other national hierarchies (...) [t]he ratings show that high prestige is accorded to occupations requiring higher education in general." As already noted, I have elsewhere (in press) examined latent social class discourses as well as ethnographically examined the entire Finnish social class system (2009, Ch. 6), though not with reference to the home.

### *Theories of social differentiation*

Among models of stratification I focus here on the broad Argylean (1994) form, on the one hand, and one more in line with Bourdieu's (1984) discussions of 'taste' as an expression of cultural and economic capital on the other. Sociologists since Weber have distinguished different dimensions of social hierarchy, particularly political power, economic power and cultural influence. Argyle's (1994) approach to class generally involves mixing these three dimensions: a person can be wealthy but have little cultural capital, for example. Argyle uses ranked professions as a proxy for social class in the UK, producing a hierarchy consisting of an upper class (old nobility, the newly rich and the politically powerful), a middle class of higher professionals (e.g. lawyers, doctors, academics) and lower professionals (teachers, social workers), a lower middle class (white collar workers), working class (manual labourers) and an underclass (long term unemployed, criminals).

This typology has its difficulties. It does not take into account that the prestige of professions can change over time, that a person can be highly educated but have very little money, that some professions do not easily fit the model and that people can switch professions, raising the question of the extent to which they belong to the 'class' denoted by occupation. Argyle is aware of these difficulties and suggests that his model be used cautiously but claims it offers a basis for further analysis, at least in Western societies,

where there are—to varying degrees—social groups whose members are of similar economic, social and educational status and who tend to socialise within these parameters of similarity and develop similar tastes. One of the problems in applying this model to Finland, however, is that certain professional fields—such as academia—are more highly regarded than in the UK and the society is less economically differentiated. Nonetheless, people's professions and education level are factored into my examination of Finnish home decoration in order to discern whether or not they reflect differences in forms of status expression. In this sense, I am drawing upon Argyle's model but, to avoid the problems associated with it, I expand his categories to produce a simple division between 'professionals' (who have been through some form of higher education) and those who have not, though some further caveats will be made. Equally, in using this model, I appreciate that home decoration may vary in Finland according to region, as may forms of status expression; I do not claim that my findings in Finland's mid-northwest are generalisable to the country as a whole.

Amongst anthropologists, there has been a decline in the use of the class category (Ortner 2004: 26), as it is sometimes regarded as too "sociological" or in other ways restrictive to research which "challenges stereotypes". However, I find it is useful to consider Kate Fox's (2004) approach to examining English social class as it is expressed through consumption and general social behaviour. In many ways, this is congruous with the methods employed by Veblen (1925) to identify the "Leisure Class" or "Upper Class" who distinguished themselves by means of their "conspicuous consumption". The analysis of taste conducted by Bourdieu (1984) is similarly useful in setting out an ethnographic programme for studying Finnish practices of status differentiation. Ortner (2006: 20, 24) insists that "class" is a "real category" in America "although class goes largely unspoken in American social life". Ultimately, she assesses class in similar terms as Fox: as relational to the lifestyle and attitudes of her informants. Indeed, she argues that working class people often desire to be middle class due to the affluence and security it offers but are repelled by the 'otherness' of the culture (2006: 31). In terms of Nordic research, Barnes (1954) found that social class in a Norwegian village existed but was not formalised, rather operating in terms of 'networks' which cut across formal organisations. He summarised it as a 'Duke of Plaza Toro' form of leadership.<sup>1</sup>

The issue of 'taste' as it expresses itself in the home has also engendered considerable international discussion. Most prominently, Miller (2001: 4) has argued that social stratification is now based, in Western countries at least, on "elements of consumption" to a greater extent than on occupation, and the home, naturally, is a place which inherently expresses status through its numerous items of material culture. Equally, it expresses social mobility and we would expect the home and person to socially ascend in tandem. Social studies of taste have agreed that people decorate their homes in such a way as to convey their social status, imitating those whom they look up to socially. Simmel (1957) termed this the "trickle effect": elites generate new fashions which move down through society, though as Wouters (2007: 18) notes of working class people who reach positions of prominence: "At times of large-scale social mobility (...) some of their manners will rise up the social ladder with them." Generally, however, elites will be imitated by the rest but often poorly, ostentatiously or selectively, leading to discernable differences in decoration according to social status (see Kron 1983; Bourdieu 1984). An example of

impressive consumption, such as a designer suit, would, if found alongside evidence of low social status, mark a person out as a *status seeker* rather than one of genuinely high status—it would be “fraudulent” (Gronow 1997: 33). Equally, being too blatant about achievements will also mark people out as social climbers: as seeking to advance their social status or insecure in their status.

In her discussion of Norwegian low-status homes (and Norwegian homes more broadly), Gullestad (1993: 130) also examines the function of homes in northern Europe. She argues that they foster a family intimacy away from the outside world and that the rooms themselves produce varying degrees of intimacy. The least intimate room—which is thus the focus for guests—is the living room and this will be employed to express the identity—and thus the status—of the occupants. This room, and also the hall, will make a statement about how the occupiers wish to be perceived. Löfgren (1994: 58) makes a similar point about Swedish homes, arguing that they foster comfort and provide security from the outside world, but are also a means of expressing who one is to that same outside world. Gronow (1997) also implicitly makes this point in relation to status expressed in the Finnish home though he does not look at it in depth. Fox (2004) certainly finds this in the English home. She observes marked social differences in how people ‘brag’, noting that so-called ‘brag walls’ may usually be found in different areas of an English house displaying artefacts, images and souvenirs that lay claim to various kinds of past achievements—depending on the social class of the bragger. As will be seen below, the concept of the brag wall is germane to Finland; there is what might be called a ‘brag shelf’ in many homes: a prominent shelf in the living room upon which status-expressing items are displayed.

### *Fieldwork and the home*

My research has been conducted over four years of living in Finland, specifically in the northern city of Oulu, since the summer of 2005. In a sense my fieldwork began, unsystematically and unintentionally, with my wife and her family as I began to discover more about the many differences that I was observing between Finnish and English culture. In making this point, I would submit that social anthropologists widely agree that it is this very culture shock which forces the fieldworker to question the ontological presuppositions of his own culture and attempt to structure the culture with which he is confronted (Kapferer 2001). After around a year, my attempts to engage with Finnish culture became more systematic and involved informal interviews—in English, or in some cases Finnish as I became better acquainted with the language—on various dimensions of Finnish culture. This programme used the snowball method to contact potential interviewees—stemming initially from my Finnish wife—and I eventually accrued many interviews, almost all with Finnish speakers, which were drawn upon as part of a broader project (Dutton 2009). These interviews were mainly conducted in Oulu, Kokkola and Helsinki.

Interviewing Finns who are relative strangers is much easier than persuading them to let you walk around their house and make notes. Accordingly, the fieldwork discussed here mostly took place in the homes of Finns I have got to know reasonably well in both

Oulu and Kokkola. It draws upon the contents of just over twenty five homes from a range of income and status groups. In other words, I am not attempting to present some reified social fact about Finland but the study does allow us to approach an under-analysed dimension of Finnishness in more detail and, with caution, make some assertions accordingly. I followed Argyle's profession-based typology though I appreciate that this cannot be transplanted in any straightforward way into a Finnish socio-economic context; it does, however provide some comparative guidelines. Thus, we have, for example, people who self-identify as 'middle class' (by which they seem to mean 'higher' or 'lower professional' in Argyle's terms), and newly professional middle-class people who do not identify themselves in this way, older and younger people, women and men, people who are actively religious and people who are not, singles and families. Equally, there are differences in age, religion and other factors.

To supplement the interviews and other ethnographic encounters, I took advantage of the way that estate agents operate in Finland. Houses for sale are open to the public at specified times at weekends so that potential buyers can walk in and look around. This is precisely what I have done, in many different kinds of houses in Oulu. It has certainly been useful but the problem is that families are inclined to remove the photographs and even valuables that are ethnographically interesting; indeed they are specifically advised to do so by some realtors. Such homes, therefore, may well not be in the state of decoration seen by guests. Nonetheless, the number of houses examined was sufficient to perceive patterns with regard to discrete issues such as living-room wall decoration in Finland and its relationship with social status.

As stated, this article relates to two specific Finnish towns both of which are relatively religious. Lutheran Church membership is around ninety percent, higher than the national eighty percent (see Dutton, in press) and both are a considerable distance from the Finnish capital Helsinki. Secondly, the sample is almost entirely Finnish-speaking. There has been considerable research on the many perceived social, political and cultural differences between the Finnish and Swedish-speakers in Finland (Liebkind, Tandefelt and Moring [eds] 2007) and a detailed examination of a predominantly Swedish area could possibly produce different results but this would require further research.

Founded in 1605, Oulu has expanded significantly since the 1960s and currently has a population of 137,000 with 295 Swedish-speakers (approx. 0.2%). The port city has both a university and a polytechnic (*ammattikorkeakoulu*) and its main employers are wireless technology companies such as Nokia. There is an airport on the outskirts, with regular flights to Helsinki, and the city emphasises that it is 'the capital of northern Finland' with easy access to 'nature' (Information: City of Oulu 2009). Founded in 1620, Kokkola has a population of 46,000 and is fourteen percent Swedish-speaking (Information from City of Kokkola, 2009). The port city promotes itself as an historical town: there are many well-preserved nineteenth-century wooden buildings (especially in a district known as Neristan), a British ship captured during the Crimean War and a fifteenth-century church in a town suburb. The main employer—other than the city itself—is the chemical industry. It has a polytechnic but no university.

*Conveying status through decoration*

This article focuses on home decoration, particularly in the living room and to a lesser extent the hall: the rooms in which guests would be received. I think it would be useful to briefly summarise the essential patterns. The starkest attempt at asserting social status of which I was aware was the display of *ylioppilas* photographs: frequently studio portraits of young people in the distinctive white caps with black peaks which announce they have just graduated from one of the high schools which prepare students for university studies. Nowadays just over fifty percent of young Finns attend this kind of school (*lukio*) but the figure was formerly smaller. In addition, some families displayed old family photographs but it was quite rare to find these gathered in one particular place. In only one home did I find what we might call a 'shrine to the dead': a table on which the lady of the house had assembled photographs exclusively of deceased relatives, along with a death announcement from the local paper, a cross and a candle. The shrine was directly opposite the shelf displaying *ylioppilas* photographs of her family.

The second obvious status assertion was in relation to sport. In general, this was most noticeable among males with an area of the room dedicated to sporting or hunting achievements. The third was in relation to 'religion' and I use that word in Geertz's (1966) sense to include functional religions. Thus, there were overt displays of Christian religiosity—such as Orthodox icons—but also overt displays of nationalism such as photographs of family members in military uniform and other such material. In addition, status differences were expressed in many other features of the houses.

*Overt displays of educational achievement*

There were fascinating differences, in terms of status and generation, in how informants conveyed social status through decoration. Ten informants expressed the degree to which they or their families were educated fairly overtly. With nine of them, this involved the *ylioppilas* photographs of either their children or themselves and their children. This is significant in Finland because, as already noted, education is regarded as a more important dimension of social status than in many other European countries. The social background and age of those who engaged in this display is highly significant in analysing this. In most cases, the occupiers of the homes were either the first generation to have attended *lukio* in their family, or older Finns; attending *lukio* in the 1950s was far more of an achievement than it is now when fifty percent of students do so. Veikko (69) recalled: "You had to pay for your own books so families could often only afford to send a particularly clever child."

Veikko and his wife Elsa had a prominent shelf in the living room on which sat their *lukio* photographs and those of all three of their daughters. The couple were in their mid to late sixties. Veikko was a retired doctor while his father had been a junior policeman, that is, further down the social scale. Elsa, a retired social worker, had a higher status background; her mother had been a teacher and her father a civil servant. Thus, the display might be understood in terms of social status insecurity. Elsa, however, who had decorated the home, commented that, "My mother was always very proud of education;

she really respected it. So maybe I kind of inherited that. But I've never really thought about it as showing off. It's just something you're proud of that you want people to see."

Precisely the same display—her own *ylioppilas* photograph and those of her children and late husband—could be found in the living room of eighty year-old Kukka. A retired teacher, she was the daughter of a fireman. For her, the collection also reflected a degree of pride. "Maybe it's different now but when I was your age, graduating from *lukio* was something to be very proud of, so that's why I display it. It makes me happy to think of it." The same display was prominent—along with various musical achievements—in the home of Ritva (60), a hairdresser. She was the daughter of a labourer and considered herself 'working class'. Riitta (50), another school teacher whose father was a car mechanic, mother a cleaner, only displayed her daughter's photographs. Her explanation was that, "It's a very nice photograph of my daughter and I'm proud of her so I want to put in a room where I can see it."

Accordingly, there appears to be some evidence of a pattern whereby older people who have moved upwards socially and educationally are likely to have an education-based display. The slight exception to this was Tuulikki, a 75 year-old spinster. She described herself as 'working class', her father having been a factory worker. She had trained as a cartographer. In the hallway were various significant maps which she had been responsible for designing—something which subtly conveys education. She informed me that, "It was my work. It's what I did all my life... those maps. I like to remember my work." The *lukio*-based shelf was rarer amongst young, middle-class Finns but it was found in three cases which roughly followed the pattern we have already noted.

The most direct example was in the home of Heidi (29) and Tommi (31). They were both from manual labouring backgrounds. Heidi's father was a factory worker and she had attended *lukio* and a polytechnic and was working as a nurse. Tommi had attended vocational school (*ammattikoulu*)—in contrast to *lukio* this trains students for a practical job rather than further studies—and worked as a caretaker. In their living room was a tall shelving unit on which was displayed Heidi's *ylioppilas* photograph and those of around fifteen of her friends, demonstrating both her popularity and the educational level of her social circle. In addition, there was a photograph of Tommi in his national service military uniform. Finnish men between the age of eighteen and twenty-six are required to serve in the military for a minimum of six months, or perform a period of social service. Sari (24), a nurse, and Maija (45), a mature student, were also the first 'educated' members of their family and the same *lukio* display could be observed. Heidi remarked of her display that, "They're all very nice photographs where everybody looks really beautiful and it's a special celebration in Finland. That's why I have them. My husband went to vocational school so the army photograph is the only really nice photograph of him, apart from our wedding photographs!"

It should be emphasised that these informants also displayed their social status in subtler decorative fashions as well. Veikko's living room included a large piano with music open, as if to show how often it was played. Elsa could play the piano. She lamented: "I really wanted my daughters to learn to play, but none of them wanted to really pursue it." I would suggest that being 'musical'—especially with regard to an instrument such as the piano—is generally a sign of being educated. Likewise, Ritva had a piano and a number of other musical instruments on conspicuous display in the living room. In



Tommi and Heidi's house, in addition to the *lukio* pictures, were a selection of African artworks. "I like Africa," Heidi informed me. "In fact, I have a Sudanese god-child and his mother gave me one these pictures. Others, I have just bought. I would love to go to Africa." Ville (35), self-identified as 'middle class', had travelled a lot. His decorating reflected this aspect of 'education', with foreign souvenirs on display. His response to my query was: "Well, I've been to these places and they have some nice memories for me! It's nice to look at them if I feel a bit down!"

### *Understated symbols of education*

Education was mostly conveyed in a more subtle way by young professionals from professional backgrounds than in the *ylioppilas* displays I had noticed elsewhere. Päivi (28) was a Lutheran priest and the daughter of a Lutheran priest. Thus, she had a Master's degree. Her husband had a doctorate and his parents were teachers. When I asked her about the *ylioppilas* collections she commented that, "I have a few friends that have photographs like that on show but I don't really see the point. They're really old photographs now. My parents have them up because for their generation going to *lukio* was still a big thing." Tiina (32) was the daughter of a doctor and a nurse, had a polytechnic degree and was working as a tour operator. Her common-law husband was the son of two teachers. When I asked about it, her comments were similar to Päivi's but she added that, "I know some people that have trophies and things up but I always think that's just showing off." Both Ville (35) and Saini (27) had a parent each who were teachers. Ville was a lawyer while Saini was a performance artist pursuing a doctorate. Anna (18), still at school, was the daughter of two doctors while her boyfriend's mother was a teacher. The boyfriend was a polytechnic student. Noomi (28) and Pekka (28) were both university graduates, one of them a teacher and the other a musician. Their parents could be classed as 'lower professional' in Argyle's terms. Thus all of these people were between eighteen and thirty-five years of age. Broadly speaking, therefore, all were relatively young, five were highly qualified (with one pursuing a Ph.D.) and the other two, though not highly educated, at least had polytechnic level of education. In Argyle's terms, they were either higher or lower professionals. Significantly, though only Ville self-identified as 'middle class', on professional and educational grounds they would easily fit into a 'middle class' as defined in Argyle's terms.

Markus (30) and Matleena's (28) house indicated that they were educated; their books (including the works of Plato) were conspicuously displayed in the living room. Imported English-language magazines such as *House and Garden* and *Country Life*—expensive to purchase in Finland—could be found in the downstairs lavatory. However, they were from educated families and there were no *lukio* photographs on display. Again, their conscious explanations were mainly aesthetic. Matleena, slightly sheepishly, said of the magazines: "Well! Sometimes you want something to read when you're in there a long time." Gullestad (1993: 137) argues that the lavatory does not tend to be decorated with potential guests in mind. However, some members of my sample—such as Veikko—had pinned up comic pictures and Kukka had a large Renoir print and two smaller framed pictures of fruit.

It was often women who had decided on the minutiae of decoration. For example, with reference to Päivi, many of the books were placed in the main room where guests would sit, conveying a general education level. Modern art prints—and her own artworks—were on display in the living room. “And I’ve always quite liked modern art. I used to live in England and that’s where I found out about Beryl Cook so having prints up by her reminds me of that time.” She displayed her own art because she liked “how it looked”. Tiina’s living room was very similar: modern art prints and Orthodox icons appeared to be the main status symbols. Noomi and Pekka displayed references to their various artistic and musical achievements, especially a piece of conceptual art designed by Pekka which was hung on the living room wall. For Noomi, who was responsible for decorating, these were for her own edification. “I guess I’m quite proud of these things and enjoyed doing them so I like to look at them!” In addition, the main room included a large shelving unit full of books: philosophical works, academic discussions of heavy metal music and many books in English (such as the complete works of Lewis Carroll). Accordingly, the living room conveyed a high level of education on the part of its decorator to any guests who might sit there. Eighteen-year-old Anna (parents doctors and still attending *lukio*) had the photograph from her friend’s *lukio* graduation on a shelf in the living room but it was so inconspicuously placed that I would not have noticed it if I had not been looking for it. However, education was again conveyed. Anna’s living room included a large shelving unit full of books which, upon closer examination, included Victorian novels in English and various Finnish academic works. She also displayed her own artwork on many of the walls.

It is of interest that the ‘education display’ has not simply evolved as Finns have become more ‘educated’. It is a matter of fact that *lukio* graduation has become, as my informants argued, far less of a status issue over the decades because of the numbers who now do so. Extrapolating from Statistics Finland, in 1950, two years after Kukka would have graduated, six percent of Finnish students graduated from *lukio* compared with today’s fifty percent. Therefore, we would not expect *lukio* graduation to be especially significant for those who are from a background where both parents graduated, and this is reflected in a general absence of *ylioppilas* photographs in such homes. However, the fact that they are relatively ‘educated’ is expressed in different, less stylised ways. We might interpret this to mean that the level of formal education is becoming less a part of identity formation amongst younger professional Finns when compared to older generations. Education is expressed more ‘individually’ which may add credence to the idea, both popular and academic, that individualism is more prevalent amongst the ‘middle class’. With the possible exception of the lawyer, the professional people interviewed—though educated—were not especially wealthy, so it is evidence of cultural capital that we are observing.

### *Religion, patriotism and social status*

Amongst professionals, ‘religion’ was the other main example of overt display. This is noteworthy because, as we will see anon, this was a point of superficial cross-over between respondents even when I grouped them according to status. In the case of Veikko’s family,

it took the form of a conspicuous cross in the front room as well as a number of orthodox icons. When I asked his wife about the cross she explained: “Well, we are Christians and I just thought it looked nice and I wanted to have it there.” The icons were also on display, “Because I just like the pictures. I think they’re very beautiful. I just look at it and think, yes, I like that.” Eighty-year-old Kukka also had an orthodox icon on display. She was a member of the Lutheran Church but, again, informed me that she had it for its aesthetic value. “I saw it when I was on holiday in Italy actually,” she explained; “I just really admired it.” In terms of patriotism, Veikko had a hat on display in the living room dating from when he did his military service. Kukka had a picture of her father—who had fought in the Winter War (against the Soviet Union in 1939–40)—wearing his military uniform as a young man and so did Tuulikki (75). In Päivi’s house there were Orthodox icons in the hall. Her explanation was rather prosaic. “I just like Orthodox icons”, she said. “I’ve always liked them.” Tiina’s perspective was similar to Päivi’s. “I’d say I’m a Christian and so that’s one reason I like the icons, and also because they just give the place a nice atmosphere.”

Where educational attainment was something new in the family, people would often have their children’s *lukio* photographs on conspicuous display. For Fox (2004), arguing the English case, this kind of behaviour is typical of a ‘working-class’ person who aspires to the ‘middle-class’ values of ‘education’ and accordingly there is a need to show that the children are educated and have thus ascended socially.

Equally fascinating is how Finnish ‘working-class’ people who do not have educated children play for status and in what capacity. The two most prominent themes were religion and hobbies, which obviously imply leisure and the possession of money. In my sample there are five households that either fall into this category or reflect it to a certain extent, and points of commonality can be seen between them. Erik and Talvikki were both retired, aged around sixty. Erik, a Swedish-speaker, had been a lorry-driver while Talvikki had worked in a shop. Talvikki liked travelling and their living room contained lots of souvenirs she had brought back from holidays in Indonesia or Australia. “So I can remember all the places I’ve been,” she laughed. “I’d really like to go back to Australia.” However, there was a more obvious piece of status expression in the hall. It was a certificate given to Erik’s mother by the Finnish government after the Winter and Continuation Wars against Russia (1939–1944) because she had been a nurse tending the wounded on the frontline. Specifically, she had been a member of the well-regarded Lotta Svärd Nursing Association. The Lotta-pin was introduced in 1922. The main motif of the pin was the blue *hakaristi* (the Finnish variation of the swastika) with a heraldic rose in every corner which was also on the certificate.<sup>2</sup>

Also on display was Erik’s mother’s confirmation certificate. I would argue that this was a way of telling guests that he was a solid, patriotic, God-fearing Finn or, at least, was from such a background. In the absence of education or particular wealth, we might argue that being ‘patriotic’ and even ‘pious’ are important means of playing for status. Indeed, McEnergy (2006: 64) observes that the English working and middle class would, in the nineteenth century, play for status against a “decadent” upper class by deploying precisely these attributes. We might argue that patriotism and physical prowess more generally, are always a ‘working-class’ means of playing for status against the ‘middle-class’. Also, it should be stressed that the significance of sport and physical prowess to contemporary

working-class self-esteem has been discussed in various cultures (see, for example, Holt [ed.] 1990) as has the importance of patriotism when compared to the middle class (e.g. Gingrich and Banks 2006, 52). For Erik personally, the framed documents “remind me of my mother, who is dead now, and she was always very proud of her work in the war and I am as well. It was a very difficult time for Finland but we kept our independence.”

Similar displays could be found in the homes of other people in a similar position. Mikko, a 26 year-old, was a plumber educated in a vocational school. On his wall was a picture of himself in military uniform and a picture of his grandfather, who had fought in the Winter War, in military dress. Ilkka, a 27 year-old builder, boasted a similar display—a conspicuous picture of his grandfather, who had fought in the Winter War, in military dress, as well as his medals of which he was very proud. “That generation fought for the fatherland”, he informed me. “I’ve always been very proud of my grandfather because of that. It was a very great thing and extremely brutal but we, for a time, vanquished the Soviet Union in Finland before we lost our true independence.” In the absence of a *lukio* photograph, Tommi displayed the photograph from his national service, implying patriotism and possibly physical prowess. In both Ilkka and Mikko’s homes there were very few books. Where more educated families displayed books, Ilkka had an expensive looking games console, a very large flat-screen television and many DVDs. Mikko’s display was almost exactly the same: DVDs, CDs, computer games and the up-to-date equipment with which to work them. One explanation for this might be that lower status people—in the absence of cultural capital—are more inclined to express economic capital where it is possible for them so to do—hence the conspicuous displays of costly equipment.

In terms of generational changes, the presence or absence of militaria in Finnish homes and on Finnish walls is very interesting. Similar military images and souvenirs exist in the homes of educated older Finns but among younger Finns, such forms of expression can only be observed in lower status homes—especially those belonging to males. This suggests two lines of explanation. It certainly appears to indicate a generational shift in how status is understood among professional Finns, but it may also provide evidence of a loss of interest in the domestic/historical sphere by highly-educated Finnish youth who now conceive of status-expression in more diverse, often international, ways. Whichever it is, no young Finns of higher status had any military regalia on display in any of the homes which I visited.

### *Sport and travel souvenirs*

The other mechanism of subtle status-seeking related to leisure. In the case of men, it would often also relate to physical prowess. Let me briefly consider this in a historical context. Laine (2006: 69) observes that with the successes of athletes like Paavo Nurmi in the 1920s, Finland “ran onto the world map”. A small, peripheral, new nation as it was before World War II, Finland was able to initially gain international recognition through its sporting achievements and in particular through running and winter sports. To be a Finn meant to be physically tough and hardy and this extended into further dimensions of Finnish national identity. Literature on the Finnish psyche refers to the

concept of *sisu* which appears to mean “toughness” or “determination” (Mead 1993: 4) but also something like the ability to cope in adverse conditions (Lewis 2005: 60) or “man’s unremitting struggle with nature” (Abrahams 1991: 184).<sup>3</sup> Upton (1980: 12) writes that Finnish agrarian politics promoted the Finn as a “sturdy independent farmer, hardworking, patriotic, sober”. Thus, being physically tough, able in sport and even militarily experienced were important parts of this now less dominant model of what it means to be a Finn; decoration with sporting and military motifs would be expressing that.

Jukka, 52, from a lower-status background, was an office worker. His wall involved the display of skiing trophies he had won. He was quite open about why. “I worked really hard for them! What’s the point of them getting dusty somewhere!” Mari and Ahti, both 44 and self-described ‘working class’, had a similar collection of sporting trophies on conspicuous display. Even the least deliberately inviting of living rooms involved some sort of status expression. Juho’s (23) bedsit contained, other than the television with a games console and necessary appliances, a Finnish flag on the wall, a hammer on the coffee table and nothing else in the way of decoration. We might interpret this as a way of displaying patriotism. The living room of Harri’s (56) three-room flat was simply piled high with records and musical instruments (a sign of talent and taste?). There were no photographs and from the state of the flat he did not, it might be assumed, generally receive guests. Both Juho and Harri lived alone, the latter being divorced. However, in general, the means of social status expression amongst young working-class men related, more obviously, to patriotism (rather than traditional religiosity) and sporting (rather than educational) achievement.

The only single, young woman of this social category whose home I went to was Martta (26), a trainee assistant nurse. There were no books in her front room or, for that matter, anywhere in the flat. Her decoration conveyed the ability to engage in a certain kind of leisure pursuit: vacationing abroad. She had cushions from a holiday in Turkey and decoration from a holiday in Thailand thus conveying that she had the money and leisure to travel. However, for her their presence was aesthetic. “I just like what they look like. And they were very cheap because that one is from southern Turkey.” It should be said that a few of the middle-class informants also displayed items that evidenced that they had travelled. However, whereas Thailand and Turkey are popular destinations for package tourism, these higher status homes usually did not display mementos of the kinds of places offering package holidays. In Ville’s case, they included items from Bulgaria and parts of South America. This could then be a sign of conspicuous consumption in the sense that in Finland evidence of a package holiday—or a holiday to a place that is commonly travelled to—does not successfully assert high social status. Evidence of a holiday to somewhere obscure may well do.

Fox (2004) notes similar distinctions in England. She finds that the status-conscious will strive not to be confused with the social class directly below them and to imitate their understanding of the class directly above them. This leads to differences such as, for example, many members of the middle classes avoiding expressing support for a certain sport or sport in general because it is perceived as working class. Theoretically, this working class orientation to sport might be explained in terms both of trickle effect and class security. Veblen (1925), of course, observes that having the time to engage in

sport has always been regarded as a sign of sufficient wealth to have leisure time and is thus popular amongst the ‘Leisure Class’ in all complex societies where “conspicuous consumption” is needed to express status.

The findings above also appear to support the idea that ‘individualism’ is found, to a greater extent, amongst professionals and the young than amongst either the less educated or older people. We have, so far, looked at a number of young, professional families who did not have a conspicuous *ylioppilas* display, nor, for that matter, military photographs. However, it should be emphasised that few of these families had photographs on conspicuous display or, if they did, they were pictures of themselves and perhaps their children and friends, rather than photographs of their parents or ‘the ancestors’ more broadly. It might be suggested that young people are less interested in the family because they have probably experienced death to a lesser extent than older people. We are left asking why younger informants such as Ilkka had photographs of their grandfathers on display but these appeared to relate more obviously to patriotism. Thus, these findings may suggest that, with younger Finns, the family—kinship—is less central to their lives than is the case in older generations. This would, in fact, be congruous with other ethnographical research (Dutton 2009) which has hinted at a generational decline, in Finland, in the use of specific terms for the extended family in favour of the simplified term, such as ‘cousin’, and descriptive words which relate directly to the close relative such as ‘sister’s husband’. Indeed, younger Finns felt that the traditional terms were mainly the preserve of older people. As noted, this focus on the family through decoration was most pronounced in the case of Elsa who had what was, essentially, an altar to the dead directly opposite an altar to the living. But it could also be observed with regard to other older informants who displayed either photographs or artefacts reminding them of their parents and, sometimes, other older relatives.

### *The Finnish nobility*

In her analysis of the English, Fox (2004: 365) finds that a stress on educational achievements is a sign of being middle class and *not* upper class. Securely upper-class people have no need to emphasise their status which, anyway, is not based on a high level of education—that would be bourgeois. This is why using the title of ‘Dr.’, for many upper-class people, is ‘Non-U’ (non-upper-class). Likewise, Löfgren (1994: 58) observes that though people use their homes to boast throughout Sweden’s social strata, it has been occurring in the middle-class circles longer than in working-class circles, and middle-class homes still are more geared to ‘representation’, to deliberately emphasising status.

Ethnographic observation of the halls and living rooms of the highest status group, only took place in three Finnish homes (all Swedish-speakers). Being members of the Finnish nobility puts them in an analogous position to Argyle’s or Fox’s upper classes, but this shows how problematic it can be to employ models of class across countries. For example, research indicates that Finland-Swedes, whatever their class, appear to have rather different tastes from Finnish speakers (Heikkilä and Kahma 2008). There were, anyway, marked points of commonality in how the three houses examined were decorated. Most obviously, in all three cases there was antique furniture, which was not necessarily

in particularly good condition, as well as antique carpets, and fine original paintings on the walls, in Henrik's (51) case, by genuine Dutch Masters. Also, in all three cases crystal chandeliers hung in the dining room—and it was interesting that there was a separate dining room which I otherwise did not observe even in large Finnish-speakers' houses such as Veikko's. In Laura's (55) house, there was a great deal of modern art but, again, it is important to note that it was genuine modern art, not the reproductions found amongst young, educated Finns. Nevertheless, she specifically commented that she did not feel she was "economically upper class".

These findings, though of course based on a small sample, reflect Kate Fox's with regard to the English old aristocracy whose tastes Fox reports as being very similar: genuine artworks, inherited furniture and so forth. They also reflect Gullestad's (1993) findings in Norway where the working class favour decoration which is 'new' and 'fashionable', the middle class decoration which is 'artistic' or 'antique' and the upper class have genuine art and inherited antiques. As noble status, like a family heirloom, is a product of family history, it is not surprising that all three of the nobles interviewed possessed inherited, antique furniture rather than antique furniture which they had purchased—that would be a clear indication of being *nouveau riche*. It would be fascinating to compare the interior decoration of extremely wealthy and eminent Finns who are not nobility but rather contemporary business elites.

### *Conclusion*

This ethnography has aimed to build on sociological research into Finnish social status through an anthropological examination of aspects of Finnish interior decoration. Building upon the renaissance in the study of social class across social anthropology—and recent comparable studies in Nordic countries—it has highlighted a number of noteworthy differences and nuances in how the rooms in Finnish houses and flats where guests would most likely be received are decorated, and has noted that there are systematic differences that express social status and generation identities even where class as such is not explicitly problematised. Older professional Finns appear to convey their education, a mark of status in Finland, through relatively subtle means such as the presence of books in the main room. But, in addition, they tend to do so quite overtly by means of '*ylioppilas* photographs' of themselves and their children and we have found that this *lukio* graduation was far more significant for their generation than it is now. By contrast, younger Finns of a similar status group who are secure in their place in the social hierarchy conveyed their education purely through subtler forms, specifically rejecting the *ylioppilas* photographs. I suggested that this may reflect a new individualism in terms of cultural capital expression, and possibly also a decline in formal education as a strong reference point for identity. At the same time, I observed the use of symbols which might broadly be called 'religious'. Religious iconography was found in all generations but family iconography was germane amongst older people as was evidence of military involvement. Amongst some younger Finns who felt less secure about their status as educated and thus broadly middle class—and amongst some working-class older Finns—education was also overtly stressed through *ylioppilas* photographs. Those who had little education seemed

to emphasise military connections to a greater extent, along with sporting achievement and certain indications of wealth. In the case of military and sporting achievements, I have noted that this reaches into a particular, deep-rooted model of Finnishness. High levels of explicit nationalism amongst the working class are not unique to Finland, but congruous with other anthropological research into social class and home decoration in Europe. Finally, the few very high-status people I was able to interview also reflected the assumed picture of the upper class in older sociological literature such as Veblen (1925). They did not stress education because it is not central to their status identity. Their home decoration reflected history and inheritance.

The similarities between the English, as studied by Kate Fox, and Finnish people are worth noting. Amongst other achievements, insecure members of the English middle class are likely to display their university graduation photographs—or those of their children—in conspicuous places as do the aspiring working or lower-middle classes. Sporting achievements are more likely boasted about, though not exclusively so, by the working class (see Holt [ed.] 1990). Thus, the conclusions—even if based on a small sample—substantiate broader assertions about European status dynamics and the significance of education as a defining status issue for the middle class and especially the professional middle class. They also parallel, to a certain extent, research in Norway and Sweden especially with regard to social differences in the specifics of decoration.

As I indicated in the introduction, I would like to open up an anthropological discussion about Finnish social differentiation and I think that the research presented here can be built upon with far more in-depth examinations. I think this is particularly so in terms of ethnographical research when one considers the substantial extent to which dimensions of Finnish culture are studied by Finns alone (see Siikala 2006). In this situation it is possible for discourses of social class and their referents to pass un-examined in a way that does not happen in cultures—such as those of France and Britain—which are overtly interested in social class. Anthropologists, as opposed to sociologists, could have a prominent role in redressing this problem.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A reference to the character from the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *The Gondoliers*. The Duke: “led his regiment from behind/He found it less exciting.”

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Finland fought off Soviet invasion until 1940 when it was forced to cede Karelia and parts of Lapland. In the Continuation War it took the land back before losing it again and being left with reparations.

<sup>3</sup> Lander (1991) noted that many Finns felt that *sisu* was less relevant to their identity than it was once.

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EDWARD DUTTON, Ph.D.  
OCCASIONAL LECTURER  
UNIVERSITY OF OULU  
e.c.dutton@dunelm.org.uk